

Grace fights emergency declaration for Libby

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Mining company maintains its Zonolite insulation isn't dangerous

HELENA — W.R. Grace and Co. is pressuring the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to back away from declaring a public health emergency in Libby, saying that its Zonolite insulation is not hazardous and the emergency label would set a bad precedent.

"For your background, (Zonolite attic insulation) has been insulating homes for over 60 years and there is no credible reason to believe (Zonolite) has ever caused an asbestos-related disease in anyone who has used it in his/her home,"

Bill Corcoran, Grace's vice president for public affairs, wrote EPA Administrator Christie Whitman on April 10.

The nine-page letter, which was also sent to several others at the EPA and elected officials, lines out point-by-point why the company believes its insulation is not dangerous. It even goes so far as to challenge long-standing thinking that the product, made mainly with Libby vermiculite, is safe as long as it's not disturbed.

Corcoran said scientists working on

behalf of the chemical company found that the actual insulation contains "biologically insignificant amounts" of breathable asbestos fibers.

"Given this fact, it is reasonable to expect that disturbance of the product will not result in hazardous levels of airborne asbestos fibers," Corcoran added.

The assertion is in direct conflict with the long-held EPA suggestion that homeowners with Zonolite insulation ought not to remove or disturb the

product on their own, for fear of exposure to asbestos. Tremolite asbestos, a smaller and more invasive fiber than other types of asbestos, is naturally occurring alongside vermiculite at W.R. Grace and Co.'s now-defunct Libby mine.

The Libby mine, which shut down in 1990 after nearly 70 years in operation, has been linked to widespread illness and death in Libby. Published reports have linked some 200 asbestos-related deaths to the mine, and federal health

studies have found that hundreds of people who have lived and worked in the area have asbestos-related lung damage.

Scientists from the EPA's Denver region have been working on cleanup in Libby since the asbestos news broke in November of 1999. As part of their plans to restore the town to health, the regional officials have asked EPA headquarters for a public health emergency declaration in Libby. EPA scientists have said Zonolite insulation presents an "imminent and substantial endangerment to public health."

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The emergency declaration would allow the EPA, under its Superfund program, to remove Zonolite insulation from an estimated 800 homes and businesses in the area.

The sticking point is that Zonolite insulation, a popular product until W.R. Grace and Co. discontinued it in the early 1980s, was widely used throughout the United States. It has been estimated that Zonolite insulates as many as 15 million homes nationwide. If the EPA agrees to remove Zonolite from Libby buildings, the question then arises about what happens with insulation in the rest of the United States.

The protests from W.R. Grace and Co. about its product haven't changed the opinion of Paul Peronard, the EPA's on-site coordinator for Libby who helped prepare the public health emergency proposal. Peronard said the regional office has sufficient evidence that exposure to Zonolite is not healthy and should be removed from Libby homes.

"Nothing has changed from our position on the ground," Peronard said of the request for an emergency declaration, made earlier this year. "Nobody's

coming back and raising fundamental issues that we can't answer."

Peronard met with Whitman in Washington, D.C., a few weeks ago about the proposal and was optimistic about the chances of the declaration. He called Whitman "very, very supportive."

He said none of the top EPA officials were "questioning the science or the nature of the work we've done."

For the past 20 years, the EPA has approached Zonolite insulation as a product that is safe, as long as it's not disturbed. For example, officials recommend homeowners do not remove the insulation themselves, at the risk of asbestos exposure.

But now, Grace is even challenging that assertion. In Corcoran's letter, the company stresses that it believes the product is completely safe and the asbestos fibers it might contain aren't enough to do harm.

"This common sense expectation is borne out by the data," wrote Corcoran.

He said Grace-funded scientists performed tests on disturbed attic insulation and found that air samples were within acceptable standards for asbestos exposure. However, Libby health advocates have maintained that because the

type of asbestos found there is more invasive than others, federal and state governments should set new standards for exposure.

After regional EPA officials asked for the public health declaration in January, top Grace officials met with EPA brass to forward their own science and ask the agency to consider national implications of the declaration, documents from the meeting showed.

However, Whitman is rumored to have been prepared to make the declaration at a U.S. Senate Superfund subcommittee hearing on April 17. The meeting has been changed to May 2, and there's no word on Whitman's decision.

Libby activist Gayla Benefield said she's a bit worried about the delay, mainly because of a three-year timeline Gov. Judy Martz set for Libby cleanup when she agreed to a plan to place Libby on the Superfund cleanup list.

"The longer this goes on, the more concerned I'm getting," said Benefield. "We've lost probably a month of cleanup time already from our short season."

Peronard said he's still hoping for a quick resolution.

"It's under consideration, and we'll get a decision real soon," he said.